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Differences between genders in the expression of emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships

Abstract

Sex differences in the amount of emotional intimacy allowed appears to be a topic of frequent comparison (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Fuller, 1963; Highlen & Johnston, 1979; Janofsky, 1971; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Levinger & Senn, 1967; Morgan, 1976; O'Neill, Fein, Velit & Frank, 1976). Balswick and Avertt (1977) stated that "expressiveness of certain emotions is often mentioned, as a characteristic which distinguishes males from females" (p. 121). Rubin (1985) reported that, from an early age, boys are socialized differently from girls. Boys are raised to be tough, active, independent, and emotionally controlled, while girls are taught to be tender, passive, dependent, and emotionally available. In addition, boys suppress their tears, even when physically hurt, while girls let their feelings out when in physical or emotional pain.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENDERS IN THE
EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONAL INTIMACY
IN SAME-SEX FRIENDSHIPS

A Research Paper
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Master of Arts in Education

by
Rickie Allen Miller
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Sex differences in the amount of emotional intimacy allowed appears to be a topic of frequent comparison (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Fuller, 1963; Highlen & Johnston, 1979; Janofsky, 1971; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Levinger & Senn, 1967; Morgan, 1976; O'Neill, Fein, Velit & Frank, 1976). Balswick and Avertt (1977) stated that "expressiveness of certain emotions is often mentioned, as a characteristic which distinguishes males from females" (p. 121). Rubin (1985) reported that, from an early age, boys are socialized differently from girls. Boys are raised to be tough, active, independent, and emotionally controlled, while girls are taught to be tender, passive, dependent, and emotionally available. In addition, boys suppress their tears, even when physically hurt, while girls let their feelings out when in physical or emotional pain.

More recently, the topic of sex differences in emotional intimacy has been reported in the context of same-sex friendships (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Bell, 1981; Booth, 1972; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Derlega, Durham, Gockel, & Sholis, 1981; Mark & Alper, 1985; Powers & Bultena, 1976; Rubin, 1983; Rubin, 1985; Williams, 1985; Wright, 1982). David and Brannon (as

cited in Williams, 1981) reported that the ways in which males and females communicate to same-sex friends is associated with sex-role stereotypes, which are thought to require the restriction of emotions in male interactions, while allowing expressiveness in female exchanges. If this is the case, a logical hypothesis would be that females are more emotionally intimate than males in same-sex friendships. If it is also the case that men desire to be more expressive and emotionally intimate (Balswick, 1982; Dosser, 1982; Lewis, 1978), then there would be a need to study differences in emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate differences between genders in the expression of emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships. A literature review will be the means by which this task is undertaken.

The value of this study is to make men and women more aware of the sex differences in the amount of emotional intimacy allowed in same-sex friendships. If it is established that there is a positive relationship between female gender and emotional intimacy, then men could learn from women how to relate more intimately

with their male friends. It has already been found that men could transfer relationship skills which women seem to have with other women, to their friendships with other men (Mark & Alper, 1985).

A limitation in this study is that the term "emotional intimacy" is relative. Fisher and Narus (1981) noted that there are many broad definitions of emotional intimacy. To a lesser extent, the terms "friendship" and "sex differences" are relative.

Definition of Terms

Emotional intimacy/affective self-disclosure: "mutual self-disclosure and other kinds of verbal sharing, as declarations of liking and loving the other, and as demonstrations of affection such as hugging and nongenital caressing (Lewis, 1978, p. 79).

Friendship: "a voluntary, close, and enduring social relationship" (Bell, 1981, p. 402).

Sex differences/Gender differences: the differences in the typical performance of the sexes in a certain area of behavior (O'Neill, 1982).

Gender Differences in Emotional Intimacy

Empirical studies of sex differences in emotional intimacy in a general context have been rather limited (Dosser, 1982; Highlen & Gillis, 1978). Early

researchers studied sex differences in emotional intimacy in various contexts: 1) friendships including parental relationships (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958), 2) counselor/client interviews (Fuller, 1963; Janofsky, 1971), 3) marriage (Levinger & Senn, 1967), and 4) telephone interviews (Janofsky, 1971).

Jourard and Lasakow (1958) studied the amount of self-disclosure adult persons revealed to different target persons such as mother, father, male friend, and female friend, and also studied sex differences in self-disclosure. Findings indicated that adult persons disclosed themselves more to mother than to father, male friend, or female friend. In addition, females disclosed more than did males in making the self known to others.

Fuller (1963) investigated the effect of the sex of counselor and client on client expressions of feelings. Results demonstrated that when counselor sex and experience, client sex, presenting problem, and preference regarding sex of counselor were controlled, female clients were judged to have expressed significantly more feeling than male clients both in intake and in first counseling interviews.

Levinger and Senn (1967) explored disclosure of feelings in marriage among 32 couples. They found that wives did tend to score higher than husbands as revealers of their feelings, but only when the other partner was the judge of the amount disclosed.

Janofsky (1971) studied affective disclosure in 80 experimental interviews consisting of 40 telephone interviews and 40 face-to-face interviews. Interviewers in both modes elicited feeling statements from undergraduate student subjects in 10-minute interviews. Results showed that females talked more about themselves and their feelings than did males, regardless of interview mode or sex of interviewer.

In more recent years, studies of sex differences in emotional intimacy have validated earlier findings. Researchers discovered that sex differences in emotional intimacy were influenced by: 1) topic content (Morgan, 1976; O'Neill et al. 1976), 2) type of feeling/emotion (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Highlen & Johnston, 1979), and 3) target person's sex (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Highlen & Johnston, 1979).

In O'Neill et al's (1976) study of preadolescent self-disclosure, a questionnaire containing a wide

range of content (i.e., ambitions, fears, bad dreams, feelings of rejection, secrets, etc.) was administered to a sample of 307 children in an urban school. Subject age ranges were 7 to 13 years; 52% were girls, 48% were boys. Findings demonstrated that girls revealed more intimate self-disclosure (i.e., emotionality, anxiety, dependence) than did boys.

Like O'Neill et al. (1976), Morgan (1976) hypothesized that males would report disclosing less than females concerning intimate topics, while there would be no sex differences in disclosure on nonintimate topics. In this study, a 25-item questionnaire with items scaled for intimacy was given to 32 male and 32 female college students, aged 18 to 33. Results supported the hypothesis that females did, in fact, disclose more than males in high-intimacy topics (i.e., love, feelings), while males and females disclosed about the same on low-intimacy topics (i.e., hobbies, favorites sports).

Allen and Haccoun (1976) investigated sex differences in emotionality by taking a multidimensional approach. Subjects were 61 male and 61 female undergraduate psychology students who completed an emotionality survey composed of four 16-

item subsections, labeled "Responsiveness," "Expressiveness," "Attitudes," and "Situations." Each subsection covered the emotions of anger, fear, joy, and sadness. Findings were that females expressed more than did males for each emotion; however, the degree of difference varied as a function of type of emotion, sex of target, and directness of expression.

Similar to Allen and Haccoun (1976), Balswick and Avertt (1977) examined sex differences in expressiveness taking into account gender, interpersonal orientation and perceived parental expressiveness. Five hundred and twenty-three undergraduate students in social science classes at three southeastern universities provided written responses to a questionnaire. Results showed that females were significantly more expressive of feelings of love, happiness and sadness than were males. In addition, female gender was found to have a strong relationship with expressiveness, independent of perceived parental expressiveness and interpersonal orientation.

Situational variables influencing affective self-disclosure with acquaintances was studied by Highlen and Johnston (1979). Seventy-two undergraduate

students, 36 males and 40 females, verbally responded to eight situations that simulated dyadic interactions with male and female acquaintances. Subject role (initiator, respondent), type of feeling (positive, negative) and sex of acquaintance (opposite, same) were independent variables in the study. Results revealed that females disclosed significantly more feelings than did males. Also for both sexes, subjects disclosed significantly more positive than negative feelings.

In sum, early researchers (Fuller, 1963; Janofsky, 1971; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Levinger & Senn, 1967) discovered that females were more emotionally intimate than were males in various contexts. These studies have found support by recent researchers (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Highlen & Johnston, 1979; Morgan, 1976; O'Neill et al. 1976) who have added that sex differences in emotional intimacy were influenced by topic content, type of feeling or emotion, target person's sex, and situational variables. In addition, later studies supported the notion that males and females differ in their expressiveness due to sex role restrictions (Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Morgan, 1976; O'Neill et al. 1976).

In the next section, sex differences in emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships will be presented, including: a) emotional intimacy in male friendships, b) emotional intimacy in female friendships, and c) a comparison of male and female differences in emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships.

Gender Differences in Emotional Intimacy in Same-Sex Friendships

Much of the descriptive literature dealing with male/male relationships indicated that men lack emotional intimacy in their friendships with other men (Franklin, 1984; Goldberg, 1976; Lewis, 1978; McGill, 1985; Miller, 1983; Nichols, 1975; Pleck, 1976; Skovholt & Hansen, 1980). Goldberg (1976) postulated that adult males did not have a single friend in whom they could confide. He further suggested that other persons did not perceive this as uncommon. To reiterate this point in a different light, McGill (1985) reported that a pattern was developed by many men in that men had many friends, but that these relationships lacked depth and/or emotional intimacy. He also stated that only one man in ten had a friend with whom he discussed work, money, and marriage; only one in more than twenty had a friendship in which he

disclosed his feelings about himself. Engel (1982) also made a similar point--"suddenly to be male and vulnerable is to be utterly acceptable but only to women" (p. 13).

In contrast to male friendships, female friendships were described as being "self-revealing and accepting" by Bell (1981, p. 405), who conducted interviews with 101 women and 65 men beginning in 1976 and continuing through 1980. He found that women described good friendships with other women as loving, supportive, and sharing of intimate details about their inner lives. Additionally, he asked women if they would or did reveal anything to at least one of their close friends. Sixty percent of the women said that they did, in comparison with 35% of the men.

Another study, very similar to Bell's, was conducted by Rubin (1983) in which she interviewed 200 men and women about emotional intimacy in their friendships. Results were that women had more than one trusted friend to whom they turned in difficult moments; they also talked openly about the special value of these relationships in their lives. Rubin (1983) reported that the men who could identify a best

friend, shared very little about their inner feelings with each other.

In Wright's (1982) comprehensive article describing more than a decade of research, friendship variables were examined by means of a questionnaire called the Acquaintance Description Form (ADF) (Wright, 1982). Eighty statements pertaining to the subject's relationship with a designated target person were given to 419 undergraduate students (242 women and 177 men). Results demonstrated that women were more likely to emphasize personalism, self-disclosure, and supportiveness, while men were more likely to emphasize instrumentality (i.e., logic, reason) and activity-based interests.

Williams (1981) examined the effect of gender, masculinity, and femininity on emotional intimacy. Undergraduate students ($N = 508$) at the University of Texas at Austin completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, a 24-item measure of emotional intimacy in same-sex friendships. Masculinity was found to be negatively related to the expression of intimacy ($b = -.194$, $p < .05$), and femininity was positively related to self-reported intimacy ($b = -1.482$, $p < .001$) among same sex friends. In addition, females were more

likely to confide in their close friends, to openly express feelings, to demonstrate affection and to discuss personal issues as opposed to men, who tended to engage in activities rather than to communicate in an affective manner.

An investigation of the conversational content between same-sex friends was conducted by Aries and Johnson (1983). Subjects were 136 parents of undergraduate students at the University of Massachusetts. A questionnaire was given to parents to complete which centered on the frequency and nature of their communication with their close friends, and on the frequency and depth of topics. Findings indicated that there were no sex differences regarding frequency of contact with the exception of females talking to their friends on the phone. Half the women reported that their phone conversations lasted 10 minutes or more, while only 19% of the men's lasted that long. Additionally, female friends (97%) conversed more often than did male friends (76% to 87%) about personal problems (i.e., doubts and fears, family intimate relationships). Also, these topics were discussed frequently by nearly 50% of the women as compared to fewer than 26% of the men.

Derlega et al. (1981), like Williams (1981) and Aries and Johnson (1983), studied the effects of subject's sex, friendship, and disclosure content on self-disclosure in same-sex pairs. Fifty-six subjects (28 males and 28 females) selected up to three out of a possible nine topics to write about to a partner. Findings indicated that women (46.4%) were more likely than were men (14.3%) to choose feminine content, while men were more likely than were women to choose masculine (53.6% vs. 39.7%) and neutral (53.6% vs. 39.3%) content.

Caldwell and Peplau (1982) examined sex differences in same-sex friendships by conducting a questionnaire study and a role play study. (The role-play study is most relevant to the present study.) In this role-play study, 52 undergraduates from the University of California at Los Angeles participated in simulated conversations with a friend. Students were paired in dyads and role-played telephone conversations between friends which consisted of one person calling to congratulate the other on a recent success. Results showed that women who role-played the successful person expressed twice as many feelings as did men, $t(24) = 2.02$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test. Also, women who role-

played the congratulating person made more supportive statements than did men, $t(24) = 1.84$ $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

Exploring sex differences in the quality of social participation in same-sex friendships, Booth (1972) collected data from 800 adults, 45 years and older, in two urban areas in Nebraska. Respondents were interviewed (in part) in terms of the social-psychological aspects of their friendships. An example of questions asked was: "Have you ever done anything with this person on the spur of the moment?" Results indicated that female friendships were more spontaneous (59%) than were male friendships (45%). Also, women confided more in their female friends (52%) than men did with their male friends (38%).

Powers and Bultena (1976), similar to Booth (1972), studied sex differences in intimate friendships of aged men and women. Participants included 234 Iowans, 70 years of age or older, who responded to interview questions related to a number of interactions with various persons and number of intimate friendships they had. Results showed that women were more likely to have an intimate friend in late life, while men had more frequent but less intimate social contacts, except

in cases in which they had lost a wife and/or other resources (i.e., income, health, employment).

In this final study, Mark and Alper (1985) assessed sex differences in the motivation to share personal concerns in same-sex friendships using college students (N=255) from a private, urban university. After being presented with verbal leads in same-sex form, subjects were given 4 minutes to write an Intimacy Imagery story with the inclusion of a disclosure of worry. Findings revealed that men (19%) were less likely than were women (52%) to write Intimacy Imagery stories. Moreover, twenty-five percent of the women reported that they felt better after sharing worry with their friends, whereas none of the men reported feeling better.

In sum, Aries and Johnson (1983), Bell (1981), Booth (1972), Caldwell and Peplau (1982), Derlega et al. (1981), Powers and Bultena (1976), Rubin (1983), and Williams (1981) collectively reported findings of females being more emotionally intimate than males in same-sex friendships. Wright (1982) discovered that women were more expressive than men, whereas men were more instrumental than women in same-sex friendships. Mark and Alper (1985) stated that not only were women

more emotionally intimate than were men in the context of same-sex friendships, but that women also benefited from releasing their intimate feelings, while men did not. Finally, Booth (1972), Derlega et al. (1981) and Wright (1982) collectively concluded that their results were in-keeping with traditional sex role socialization--thus validating other studies cited in this paper (i.e., Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Morgan, 1976; O'Neill, 1976).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed indicates, as hypothesized, that women are clearly more emotionally intimate than are men in same-sex friendships. Specifically, findings revealed that: a) male/male friendships are limited in their expressions of emotional intimacy; b) female/female friendships are caring, supportive, and intimate; and c) females are allowed to express more emotional intimacy in their friendships than are men. In addition, most of these studies stated (or alluded to the fact) that traditional sex role stereotypes were upheld--meaning that men restricted their emotions, while women expressed their emotions with more leeway.

The limitations of this study are evident in the relativeness of the terms utilized, especially with respect to emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy, an intangible construct, cannot be directly measured. Therefore, broadly used definitions are given throughout the studies reported upon.

Another possible limitation concerns the populations with which these studies were conducted. With some exceptions, most studies used undergraduate college students as their subjects (i.e., Aries & Johnson, 1983; Bell, 1981; Powers & Bultena, 1976; Rubin, 1985). Therefore, results of these studies can only be generalized to college student populations. It appears that more studies of gender differences in same-sex friendships need to be conducted using other populations such as non-student, adult persons of various ages.

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